Help welcome or not: Understanding consumer shopping motivation in curated fashion retailing

Anna Kathrin Sebald⁎, Frank Jacob

Department of Marketing, ESCP Europe Business School Berlin, Heubnerweg 8-10, D-14059 Berlin, Germany

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Abstract

This study explores the motivational reasons for and against adopting curated retailing in fashion and apparel, which little extant research addresses. In curated fashion retailing, stylists create personalized outfits to assist consumers with their shopping. Because consumers vary in their demands, retailers must understand the different factors influencing individual adoption decisions. For this purpose, we conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with consumers and non-consumers of curated fashion as well as stylists. The study enhances knowledge of online shopping motivation in consulting-intensive retail sectors and provides further evidence of the influence of contextual factors on shopping motivations. Most notably, we identify unique factors of customized solutions, a characteristic feature of curated fashion retailing. From a managerial standpoint, our findings provide retailers a lens through which they can better target marketing activities and improve sales training.

1. Introduction

E-commerce in the retailing sector is growing (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010); increasingly, consumers use the Internet as an additional purchasing channel (Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). This development has prompted a shift in sales revenue in favor of web-based retailing (Center for Retail Research UK, 2017). This shift has spread to consulting-intensive areas, which have commonly been marketed offline, though the impersonal and potentially overloaded nature of e-commerce remains a drawback for many consumers (Holzwarth et al., 2006).

For instance, consider fashion and apparel, the most popular e-commerce retailing category (Euromonitor International, 2016). Here, consumer need for individual consultation is usually high (Brito et al., 2015), in that products are comparatively standardized in size and shape, and collections and trends change several times a year (Rajamma et al., 2007). To assist consumers with product recommendations and to improve the possibility for multi-attribute comparisons, many online retailers have implemented recommender systems or avatars. Such interactive technologies operate as virtual salespeople; however, genuine interactivity is still missing, and the issue of information overload remains in e-commerce (Baier and Stüber, 2010).

To compensate for both problems, a unique service innovation has recently gained attention in inspiration- and consultation-driven sectors such as fashion, home furnishings, and cosmetics: The central idea of so-called curated retailing is to support consumers in their shopping process by preselecting products tailor-made to their individual preferences (Möhrenbruch et al., 2014). Originally emerging in the United States, these personalized online shopping services have since grown past their niche beginnings, spreading to other countries (Hett, 2015). For instance, in Germany, the service has primarily surged in popularity in fashion retailing since approximately 2012. Professional stylists not only provide online help to consumers but create complete, personalized outfits. Currently in Germany, not only start-ups (e.g., Outfittery, Modomoto, Kisura) use the curated retailing logic, but also Zalando, the first pure-play fashion online retailer, has initiated a curated retail business (Zalon). In addition, curated retailing has entered the offline shopping arena as well (Hütz, 2016). Small, family-owned traditional fashion stores have transferred their consultancy expertise to the Internet by adding a curated retailing service as an entry point for ecommerce, an extension of their existing web presence, or an incentive to enter their stores.

Despite the popularity of curated retailing, such retailers are often not yet profitable because their customers’ average shopping basket values and order frequencies are still too low. Moreover, many consumers show resistance to adopting the service from the beginning, in contrast to marketers and researchers’ generally held but biased view that consumers are open toward innovations (Talke and Heidenreich, 2014). To overcome this so-called pro-change bias in their thinking, it is imperative for curated retailers to understand the motivational reasons...
both for and against adoption.

A growing body of literature examines differences between traditional and online shoppers (e.g., Mathwick et al., 2001; Rajamma et al., 2007; Srivivasan et al., 2002). Because curated retailing can be considered a hybrid between offline and online retailing, some motivational overlaps with both channels can be expected. However, making reliable assessments about curated retail shoppers’ motivations is difficult. To date, no empirical studies of curated retailing exist, and simply applying previous findings to new sectors of retailing may neglect important motivations specific to it. For instance, when shoppers decide to consult salespeople online for assistance, the interactions with salespeople may have different meanings for the consumer than in traditional retailing. In addition, it remains unclear why more online shoppers, many of whom are usually value-convenient and time-saving, do not adopt curated retailing.

To achieve greater clarity in this respect, we address the following research question: What are the motivational reasons for and against consumer adoption of curated retailing in ecommerce? In exploring what motivates consumers to welcome styling help or not, this research makes contributions in four respects. First, it extends knowledge about online shopping motivation in consulting-intensive retail sectors. In particular, our results add the customized solution as a hitherto undocumented but distinct predominant motivational reason in curated retailing, while supporting and broadening previous findings on retail in general. Second, we respond to a call for follow-up research by Haas and Kenning (2014, p. 438) who advocate that “future research should examine motivational aspects of consultation in other retail formats” as they do for department stores. Third, contrary to common practice in shopping motivation literature, the study seeks to shed light on reasons against adoption to conquer the pro-innovation bias repeatedly observed by recent research (e.g., Groß, 2016; Lian and Yen, 2014; Talke and Heidenreich, 2014). As such, this study offers additional evidence concerning the influence of contextual factors on shopping motivations.

Fourth, we contribute by describing an emerging and novel retail trend with salespeople may have different meanings for the consumer than in traditional retailing. In addition, it remains unclear why more online shoppers, many of whom are usually value-convenient and time-saving, do not adopt curated retailing.

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We also provide guidance to retailers for practical decision making. For instance, our identification of curated retailing—specific motivational reasons can help them better target their marketing activities and increase customer engagement. In this context, several trend reports underscore the particular relevance of curated retailing for traditional brick-and-mortar retailers whose unique selling proposition has always been personal consultation (e.g., Boston Retail Partners, 2017; eMarketer, 2012; Magento, 2013). Thus, as mentioned previously, curated retailing can support even small traditional retailers in differentiating and competing against online retailers and to connect with a wider audience.

The article is structured as follows: We begin with theoretical background information on curated retailing, consumer adoption and resistance, and shopping motivations in retailing. Next, we detail our research methodology. Finally, we present results and implications for retailers.

### 2. Theoretical background

#### 2.1. Curated fashion retailing

Although curated retailing in fashion and apparel has recently surged in popularity, research addressing the phenomenon is scant. Only a few purely conceptual studies exist (Eisewicht, 2017; Gyllensvärd and Kaufmann, 2013; Möhlenbruch et al., 2014, 2016). These studies unanimously underscore the high degree of service orientation and personalization as decisive factors governing the success of curated retailing. Its distinct focus on consumer needs and tailor-made solutions represents a pioneering approach in retailing (Möhlenbruch et al., 2014, 2016). Indeed, given that salespeople offer expert advice and curated product selections, some researchers even call it a “re-traditionalization” of retailing (Eisewicht, 2017; Gyllensvärd and Kaufmann, 2013).

In contrast, the idea of curation and, more broadly, the role of intermediaries have been the subject of research for a longer time period. Historically applied to the fields of art collections and museums (O’Neill, 2007), the concept of curation has been used in areas such as music, fashion, craft, and food (e.g., Hracs et al., 2013; Joosse and Hracs, 2015; Shultz, 2015), though no clear definition has emerged. An exception is Joosse and Hracs (2015, p. 207); in their analysis of food curation, they define curation as “the interpreting, translating and shaping of the marketplace through the practice of sorting, organizing, evaluating and ascribing value(s) to specific products.” In other words, curators can provide universal or consumer-specific recommendations. As such, this definition provides a useful lens through which researchers can understand how intermediaries (e.g., collective buying groups, food bag services, food bloggers) provide consumers direction to their search for good food. Nonetheless, Joosse and Hracs (2015) themselves acknowledge that curation must be understood in context because the scope of activities can differ depending on industry, location, and scale. For instance, whereas evaluating new sourcing arrangements is a central activity for food curators, fashion, cosmetic, and furniture curators focus little on these arrangements.

Therefore, we opt for a more nuanced conceptualization of curation that places more emphasis on the specific nature of curated retailing. Curated retailing creates a new shopping experience; it incorporates convenient and effective shopping online and sales advice while focusing on solutions. To reflect these aspects, herein we use the following definition: Curated retailing combines convenient online shopping with personal consultation service to provide a more personalized online experience through curated product selections, orientation and decision aids, and tailor-made solutions based on the customer’s preferences.

In the context of curated fashion retailing, stylists take on the role of curators. After registering for free, consumers must submit an online questionnaire detailing their fashion preferences (e.g., fashion style, color, size, budget). In the next step, consumers choose a stylist, who creates personalized outfits that are then shipped in the form of outfit boxes. To further personalize the one-to-one interaction between consumer and stylist, the consumer can optionally provide additional data.
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